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National Desk

CLINTON UNDER FIRE Clinton Enlists Kantor, Offers Specific Denial
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WASHINGTON -- President Clinton stepped up his defense against allegations of sexual misconduct, recruiting veteran political warrior and longtime advisor Mickey Kantor to become his personal counsel and signing off Saturday on a set of "talking points" for aides that significantly amplify his denial of a sexual relationship with a White House intern.

The president "certainly denies that he ever had oral sex" with 24-year-old former intern Monica S. Lewinsky, according to the memo to be used by his defenders. Lewinsky herself, in a sworn statement, has denied having a sexual relationship with Clinton. In telephone conversations secretly tape-recorded by a friend, however, Lewinsky reportedly said they had oral sex. The president's previous denials were viewed by some as being worded artfully so that they might exclude oral sex.

Approval of the talking points may be an early sign of the counterattack that some Clinton advisors hope Kantor will help the White House launch after a week of near-paralysis.

Kantor, who began helping the White House late Friday and continued to meet with aides there on Saturday, played a key role in devising the response that saved Clinton's 1992 bid for the presidency when nightclub singer Gennifer Flowers accused the then-Arkansas governor of sexual impropriety. And it is Kantor's political savvy, more than his legal expertise, that will be tested now.

In the tumultuous week since independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr began investigating claims that Lewinsky was involved sexually with Clinton, the White House has seen its position steadily erode. Aides, hobbled by legal concerns and unsure about the facts, have been unable to counterattack.

And, as senior administration officials noted bitterly on Saturday, efforts to persuade congressional or other prominent Democrats to speak out for Clinton have almost uniformly failed.



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Indeed, Clinton's own former chief of staff, Leon E. Panetta, publicly suggested it might be best for Vice President Al Gore to take over if the allegations prove true.

What Other Developments Disclose

Against this darkening background, there were these other developments:

- * Lewinsky's lawyer, William Ginsburg, said negotiations with Starr's office are at a standstill. Ginsburg demanded "complete immunity" from prosecution before Lewinsky will cooperate with the investigation into possible perjury, obstruction of justice or other criminal wrongdoing by Clinton.

"That's my line in the sand," he said.

- * New excerpts of Linda Tripp's tapes of Lewinsky, released by Newsweek magazine, show the two women discussing Lewinsky's plan to lie about her relations with Clinton, as well as pressures she was under to cover it up.

- * Television film was unearthed showing Clinton surrounded by voters at an outdoor rally in November 1996, with a broadly smiling Lewinsky standing right in front of him and then leaning forward for a presidential embrace.

- * After a debate over tactics, the White House decided not to avoid today's television talk shows but instead to send three politically oriented aides, Rahm Emanuel, Paul Begala and Ann Lewis, before the cameras to defend the president.

The decision to bring Kantor onto the team reflected a realization by Clinton and his inner circle that events, and with them public opinion, were outrunning their efforts to protect themselves.

Not only was almost no prominent figure rising vigorously to the president's defense, but the torrent of leaks about the supposed nature of Clinton's alleged relationship with Lewinsky was so shocking that by Saturday, talk of impeachment and resignation was commonplace. "There's nobody for him," one veteran Democratic operative said, reflecting the pervasive gloom. "Even Nixon had a few people for him at the end."

Tacitly acknowledging the downward slide and the difficulty in arresting it, Rep. Charles B. Rangel (D-N.Y.) said: "When the president has not more vigorously challenged those who make these allegations but speaks in terms of legal jargon, it creates a bad situation."

Said a senior administration official: "We are dealing with a rapidly moving legal situation caused by an extremely aggressive independent counsel. To some extent, the press is moving this

story faster than it is possible for us to respond to."

It was not just the speed of press revelations that hampered the White House.

While his lawyers urged caution from the beginning, Clinton's political advisors, at first, argued for prompt disclosure of all the facts--taking it for granted that Clinton, as he had so often in the past, could make his case successfully to the public.

Only gradually have some senior aides come to realize that such a press conference or other public appearance might not be feasible.

"The political people are catching up with the legal people about the facts, and they recognize that the facts may be such that it would be better to wait and see what develops before he goes out" in public, one senior official said later Saturday.

The talking points represented a middle ground.

Members of the White House staff had been working for several days to draft the detailed set of authorized answers administration officials and other defenders could give to questions about the matter.

In general, they affirm the president's contention that "there was no improper relationship" with Lewinsky. But they deal specifically with oral sex because some skeptics have suggested Clinton, in effect, had his fingers crossed in his earlier denials because--it was suggested--he does not believe having oral sex constitutes a sexual relationship.

Bringing Kantor aboard, as Clinton did with a face-to-face appeal at the White House, is seen by some aides as an even more important sign that the White House is finally beginning to marshal its resources.

"They trust and like him on a personal level and know that he is savvy. He's been there for the president for most of his political life," a knowledgeable official said.

Moreover, making Kantor a personal lawyer instead of a White House aide helps the Clintons deal with another problem: Legally, members of the White House staff can be compelled to reveal what they have heard from the president, even if the aides are lawyers.

Thus, at least some senior aides have been reluctant to talk candidly with Clinton for fear they might be subpoenaed by Starr. And Clinton's legal team, though protected by lawyer-client privilege, lacks the political experience to advise him on that aspect of the issue.

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Kantor, as a private lawyer with years of political experience, can bridge the gap.

Whether Kantor can find a rabbit in the hat again remains to be seen, but by Saturday night the mood inside the White House was more hopeful.

"I've had a lot of experience with these kinds of things, and this is one of the nastiest," an advisor said, but "I think we're going forward now, and forward direction is a lot better."

Talks Stalled, Lawyer for Lewinsky Says

Ginsburg, Lewinsky's lawyer said negotiations with the independent counsel's office are stalled, though he has continued to seek ways to restart the talks.

If his client does not receive "complete immunity," he said, she will exercise her 5th Amendment protection against self-incrimination if called before a federal grand jury Tuesday, as she is scheduled to do.

"The clock is ticking," Ginsburg said. " . . . But I need a promise not to prosecute."

For his part, the independent counsel appeared unwilling to yield on his demand that Lewinsky submit a detailed proffer, summarizing what she is willing to say under oath before immunity is promised.

"There has been no deal," said one source. "We're not on the same page."

Ginsburg said he believes Starr's office is hesitant about granting her immunity because of earlier problems with potential prosecution witnesses in the past.

Ginsburg pointed to former Department of Justice official and Clinton confidant Webster L. Hubbell and former Whitewater real estate partner Susan McDougal, both of whom initially agreed to help Starr's office, but in the end did not present damaging testimony against Clinton.

"Starr and his office are afraid that they will be burned thrice," Ginsburg said. "Webb Hubbell and Susan McDougal went south, or sour, on him and did not participate. So he is concerned that he will get burned again."

Attorney Describes Apartment Search

Ginsburg described in detail a search and seizure of Lewinsky's property from her Watergate apartment on Thursday. He said the search, to which Lewinsky voluntarily consented, lasted two hours. Lewinsky and her mother were both present.

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"The federal agents knocked on the door and the girls said, 'Good morning,' and they had coffee and cakes laid out," he said. "They [the agents] were very courteous. They went room by room, and they didn't tear anything apart."

Taken were her computer, several dresses and at least one dark-colored pantsuit. Also seized were gifts Lewinsky allegedly had received from the president and other White House staffers, such as a T-shirt, a hatpin and a book of Walt Whitman poetry. s Regarding the dresses, Ginsburg said he assumed that agents were looking for any signs of Clinton's semen. There has been speculation that semen on Lewinsky's clothing could be used to establish a DNA link to Clinton.

Ginsburg said he had no knowledge of any stained dresses.

"I'm not aware of it," he said. "And if such a thing existed, you wouldn't think my client would have had her dress cleaned after she had sex?"

The lawyer also sharply denied reports that he and Lewinsky turned down an offer of immunity from Starr's office shortly after she was confronted with the tape-recordings at a meeting at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Arlington, Va.

Meanwhile, Ginsburg said Lewinsky continues to be racked by the allegations surrounding her, and that she also feels betrayed by Tripp, the friend who made the tape recordings.

"Monica's agenda is to unruin her life, to bring it into equilibrium and balance again, and to avoid a felony conviction and avoid jail."

Regarding Tripp, Ginsburg said: "Monica is angry. She feels betrayed. She doesn't understand, nor do I. What did Linda Tripp get? What's her motive?"

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Times staff writers Jack Nelson, Jonathan Peterson, Alan C. Miller, Jane Hall and Richard T. Cooper contributed to this story.

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PHOTO: President Clinton hugs a woman identified as Monica S. Lewinsky during a rally in November 1996.; PHOTOGRAPHER: CNN

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

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